

How Soon Did the FBI Presume Oswald's (Lone) Guilt?

Immediately, if Richard Nixon told the truth.

In the 3rd CBS telecast of his taped memoirs, questioning by his former staffer Gannon, on 60 Minutes 4/15/84, Nixon was asked where he was when he learned that JFK had been assassinated. His response was longer and was not in terms of his knowing that JFK had died. He told this story:

He was in a cab on his way home. (He did not say it, but this was from the airport, on his return from Dallas.) He had heard nothing on the plane or in the airport or while waiting to get a cab or from the cabbie, who had no radio. At a stop a man rushed up and told them to turn the radio on, the JFK had been shot, but there was no radio to turn on. Nixon estimated that it was 25 minutes later when he was home. He said he phoned J. Edgar Hoover. He did not say right away and he did not say after a wait, or that he'd had a radio or TV on. So, while it can be presumed he ~~want~~ meant he phoned as soon as he was home, this is merely a presumption. What he said Hoover told him indicates but is not conclusive on time. Nixon said that when he got Hoover he asked if it was a "right-wing nut." He said Hoover said no, that a Communist - and Nixon emphasized that this is the way Hoover always pronounced the word - had shot JFK. No mention of death.

If I knew the plane schedule it might make this less conjectural, at least on when Nixon got home.

Harold Weisberg 4/16/84

SHADOWS

DALLAS' DARK JOURNEY

An Essay

By Blackie Sherrod
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First of all, you must realize that the press box is the Plymouth Rock for all gillows humor as we know it today. There is no subject sacred to the biting lash of the sport scribes, not so much in their literary efforts but in their personal communication. Believe me, the press box was spewing sick humor around long before cable television.

And just as the wretches strive for topers, also are they dedicated to stoicism. If a barb lodges under one's skin, one must never show it. One must be as the Spartan child who stole a fox, hid it under his tunic and when it began gnawing on his flesh, never changed expression lest it would give away his crime.

Those were the accepted press box mores in December 1963 when I walked into a hospital suite at the Lexington Hotel in Manhattan. It was a sports trip, a gathering of All-American footballers and attending writers.

"Watch out, everybody," yelled a man at the bar. Here's that guy from Dallas! He's probably got a gun!" The poker was an old newspaper pal from Georgia. The accepted reaction would have been to crouch at the knees, slap the hip in a swift draw. Instead, I got mad. Well, not exactly mad, but I felt a quick surge of resentment toward my old friend. I felt my ears turning crimson, could actually feel the heat. The sense of dark humor had taken a leave of absence. I was utterly defenseless and I didn't like the feeling. I wanted to strike back but didn't know how. I felt ashamed and yet I was angry at myself for that feeling.

Now, looking back on those bewildering times, I realize that *must* have been the prevalent emotion that gripped the city in the immediate days after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy on that damned miserable Nov. 22. Residents of Dallas, at least the overwhelming majority, were saddened by the rifle shots, certainly, but down deep inside, we also were resentful as hell that it happened *here*. Perhaps civic loyalists have a difficult time admitting that even today, but that's the way it was.

You see, this was new to the world. Today, cities could handle it. Today, people are hardened to sudden changes of history. We are still shocked but the recovery time is far less. Forces go into immediate action and confusion is cut to a minimum. Like grammar school pupils in a well-disciplined fire drill. Back then, it was a summer. It was like Joe Louis banging you on the chin and, even if you didn't lose consciousness, you felt powerless to move. You could see and hear and smell, but you were maddeningly immobile. Oh, proud Dallas historians might have you think the

city rallied around, that astute leaders mounted their chargers and quickly began positive moves. Not from where I sat, there in the newsroom of an afternoon paper.

It seemed to me that the brave, resolute commanders — and even many of us enlisted men — joined our salivary jaws, sprang to the saddle and rode determinedly off in all directions. We wanted desperately to defend the fort but we didn't know the drill. We were the mother whose beloved son has been caught in the act of armed robbery. What can you say?

It was like meekfolk at an old-timey country funeral. Women busied themselves inside the house, answering the phone, slicing the baked ham, tending the mourners. And the men gathered awkwardly in the yard, smoking. And a lady would call from the back porch, asking someone to fetch bread from the grocery and a dozen men would jump for their cars. They wanted *action*, wanted *movement*, wanted to demonstrate by their energies that they could be of use, could contribute to easing the day.

That's the way I remember that assassination aftermath. Nobody wanted to stand around and talk about it; everybody wanted to do something. I wasn't always the right thing. Nobody was real sure of the route to the grocery store.

Those in the media were more fortunate than others. They stayed busy. Yet frequently they stepped out of character. I remember standing in the editor's office (watching the only television set on the floor), reporters sitting on the carpet, leaning against the wall, when the announcer gave the definite news that the president indeed was dead. I heard a gasp and a male reporter was sobbing. I had never seen that before.

Late the next night, those on the midnight watch heard fearful screams from somewhere down the corridors. Understand, the assassination brought muns out of the woodwork like earthworms after a rain. We had zany newsroom visitors who shouted and threatened and had to be removed forcibly. So screams in the night were not exactly out of mode.

Reporters scattered at high hope, each seeking the source. Finally it was traced. A veteran pressman was trapped on stairs between floors. The door he entered locked behind him, the door he sought was locked in front of him. So he screamed at the top of his voice, really terrified shrieks. A week earlier, he would have embraced him, done that. A week later, it would have opened to free him, to tears. But now, when the door was opened to free him, he said not a word, just walked off to his pressroom station.

Merriman Smith, the senior White House correspondent, came to our office to write and file his

assassination coverage for United Press International. He was a calm white-haired professional and it was most impressive when he finished, boarded the elevator and said, as the door closed, "Big D is Little D now."

Those who heard him resented it, mostly because we feared that would be the international opinion. Yet some of us have long held the theory that Jack Ruby's shooting of Lee Harvey Oswald — more than the assassination — was the absolute crusher for the Dallas image. If we may call it that.

On Sunday in Washington, the riderless horse and the muffled drums (you would never, never forget that drum beat) were bearing the president's coffin to the Capitol. And in the basement of the Dallas City Hall and police buildings, Ruby was shooting Oswald in the left side with a .38-caliber Colt.

Were it not for Ruby's act, the assassination might not have been so damning for the city. The town might have escaped as "a victim of circumstance," like Buffalo, N.Y., where William McKinley went down and the Washington depot where James Garfield was shot, mere happenstance locations that did not add to nor subtract from the happening itself.

But then the Ruby slaying pulled the plug. In the City Hall basement, can you believe it? This became the Dallas black eye that no amount of brave cosmetics could disguise. And to compound it all, the mystery of Oswald died with him and the speculation kept, and still keeps, the subject dreadfully alive.

I remember an FBI agent, a friend of mine, coming to the newspaper office late Friday night of the assassination, to inspect all photographs taken by our lensmen that day, seeking any background face or anything that might be a clue as to Oswald's motive. He cursed Oswald, looked over his shoulder and muttered confidentially.

"I wish they'd let us have him for a few hours," he said. "We'd shoot his ass full of sodium penicillin and find out what's going on."

Instead the question remains in history. Like the hulk of the U.S. Arizona in the shallow waters of Pearl Harbor, oil still seeping to the surface, a subject to be brought down from the shelf and dusted and polished every decade or so.

To Dallas old-timers, the tragedy has become like a birthmark on your child's face. The blemish is there but you have become accustomed to it so that it is no longer a constant headache. Not until a stranger remarks about it, that is, not until you drive past the old School Book Depository and see tourists staring at the sixth-floor window and unstrapping their Kodaks. And you still feel, however faintly, that stir of resentment and you realize again that the day and its shadow will never be forever erased from memory.

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has been caught in the act of armed robbery.
What can you say?*

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